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Mission-minded pastoral theology and the notion of God's power: Maturity through vulnerability

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This article contributed to constructive missional theology by grappling with the issues of God's power and Christian maturity. This is important, because we live in a wounded world fraught with injustice, violations of human dignity, and power abuse. Pastors and other caregivers are called to be involved with caring for people to promote more just societies where human dignity flourishes. Such caring practices form a crucial and practical part of the human embodiment of God's loving mission in our wounded living spaces. The main research question that was addressed, is as follows: How can pastoral theology be directed by a missional understanding of the church so that it can become clear how caring practices embody the *missio Dei*? Considering this question, this article explicated what kind of theology is appropriate when mission-minded Christian caregivers want to interpret God's power in a fractured world. The author indicated – through a careful and methodical literature study – that the recovery of a missional, trinitarian understanding of God, offers fresh resources for reconceptualising spiritual formation, focusing on mission as authentic discipleship. While unravelling this article's main argument, it was deemed of paramount importance to harmonise our ideas about the power of God, because such notions (about God's power) often dictate how we act within human relationships, which are also replete with power. It was concluded that preference needs to be given to viewing 'power as love' (vulnerability) rather than 'power as force' (control). Eventually the analysis of relevant literature resources indicated that pastoral care done in congregations, does not merely find its end goal in strengthening believers to grow into maturity in Christ, but also fosters our missional calling as sent disciples of the triune God. In addition, Christian faith maturity was found to be essential if pastoral theology and pastoral care practices – mostly performed by pastors or other caregivers in faith communities – aim to promote justice and human dignity as integral part of the *missio Dei*.

Contribution: The dearth of consideration for the vital issue of Christian maturity presents a challenge for the field of mission studies, when pastoral theology and care practices engage with views regarding God's power. The rigorous literature study contributed constructive insights for missional churches that value God's justice and dignity to all.

Keywords: power; maturity; vulnerability; missional theology; spiritual formation; pastoral theology; pastoral care; justice.

Introduction

The emerging post-pandemic era offers many churches and Christian movements a fresh chance to recommit itself to its core calling of being intentionally missional (Bendor-Samuel 2020). Faith communities across the globe have been disrupted. Now they are challenged to find their sole fulfilment in the triune God and to let all their strategies be edified by sound missional theology. Such theology is needed to substitute the often performance-driven ambitions to salvage congregations (Guder 2015). This article aims to contribute to constructive missional theology by grappling with two related issues, namely God's power and Christian maturity. Later, what is implied by this concept of maturity, will be clarified. Suffice to say, as a general introductory remark, that *maturity* in this article is specifically focused on growing or maturing in Christian faith. Therefore, it is linked to the biblical practices of spiritual formation.

Wonsuk Ma and Kenneth Ross (eds. 2013) indicate extensively how world Christianity is expanding, especially within Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, which are discovering new vision and energy for mission through a strong emphasis on believers' spiritual life. However, it is telling that they (Wonsuk Ma & Kenneth Ross eds. 2013:232) conclude: In these dynamic

movements, theological maturity and missiological depth are 'conspicuous by their absence'. Why did they come to this conclusion? And further, for what purpose is the notion of Christian maturity significant at all, especially within the academic field of mission studies?

Traditionally, the primary focus of church missionary activities falls on evangelisation for the salvation of people who receive its reconciling message. However, that is not the goal, but rather just the start of what the sharing of the gospel, as integral activity of the *missio Dei*, implies. Balia and Kim (2010) therefore rightly emphasise the holistic nature of salvation, by asserting the following:

> As God does not give us a partial salvation, we cannot limit evangelism only to the spiritual realm. Rather, we must acknowledge that evangelism proclaims good news for every part of our life, society and creation. (p. 211)

Furthermore, it would be an error to downsize missionary activities to reaching the unreached, because after conversion follows the pilgrimage of discipleship and all the implications of a Christian's journeys of missional spiritual formation (Gibson 2022; ed. Zscheile 2012). The Pauline letters clearly remind us of a fundamental interpenetration of mission and spiritual formation (Berding 2013). According to Dallas Willard (2021:75), spiritual formation is 'the process where one moves and is moved from self-worship to Christ-centred self-denial as a general condition of life in God's present and eternal kingdom'. Biblically speaking, this road of growing into Christ has its own *telos*, namely reaching maturity. On this road, discipleship needs to be understood – in line with Stephen Bevans (2022) – as a call to mission, rather than 'a static concept of church membership or cozy relationship with Jesus'. Transformed discipleship includes hospitality, creation care, confronting injustice as well as 'being in solidarity with the world's margins' (Bevans 2022:120; see also Keum 2013:15). In essence, such discipleship involves a (life-long) process of radical change in individual and collective attitudes, behaviours and values (ed. Jukko 2022:298).

The formative role of mission-minded pastoral theology and care amid human vulnerabilities

From a disciplinary perspective, this article lies in the nexus between missiology and pastoral theology. It aims to discern how pastoral theology should be directed by a missional understanding of the church, because contemporary mission studies, as Kim and Fitchett-Climenhaga assert (2022:5), 'increasingly overlaps with the discipline of practical theology' (within which I deem pastoral theology as a sub-discipline). Church-based pastoral theology and care play a formative role in the lives of Christian disciples. Not only through the care offered by ordained pastors, but also via the mutual care of Christians building up one another within the faith community (Van der Watt 2018). These caring practices are integral in the process of concretely embodying the *missio*

Dei. Dean Flemming (2015:xxi) affirms this sentiment by stating: 'Christian nurture and formation are also missional, not least because they enable and equip Christian communities to engage in the restoring mission of God'.

Considering this, pastoral care done in congregations does not merely find its end goal in strengthening believers to grow into maturity in Christ, but also fosters our missional calling as sent disciples of the triune God of the Bible, sharing (in) the life of God as Father, Son and Spirit (Goheen 2018). Pastoral care practices are part of God's mission as healing and wholeness, aligned within a missional ecclesiology (see Keum 2013:19).

The significance of this (intentional) trinitarian formulation of God can cryptically be motivated as follows: Numerous mission gatherings with global representation have integrated a trinitarian emphasis into their formulations on mission since the second half of the 20th century.[1] One leading missiologist, Darrel Guder (2009:68), thus formulates it as follows: 'To understand the Trinity rightly is to participate in the enabled action of witness which carries out the mission of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit'. This type of interpretation, that is, drawing practical conclusions for the church's mission, based on the inner life of the (immanent) Trinity, is a-typical in Reformed theological thought. We should be cautious not to misuse the doctrine of the Trinity in ideological ways to attribute divine sanction to ideas for our own preferred cause (see Van den Brink 2003:237).

Nevertheless, there is a wide 'spread' of Reformed theological thought that directs us in the way we should think about the triune character of God (see Smit 2009). In the end, it is important to realise that God is not a problem to be solved, but a divine Person to know. And thus, the concept and the life of the Trinity is indeed relevant to our lives as Christians as we participate in the *missio Dei*. Famous missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, wrote a book titled, *Trinitarian faith and today's mission* (1964), that explicates his thoughts on this theme.

For the purpose of this article's main argument, it is therefore important to note that since the time of the Early Church, the apostolic mission was not narrowly focused on the saving of souls and their integration into communities of the saved. Instead, Guder (2007:256) stresses, 'It was the formation of witnessing communities whose purpose was to continue the witness that brought them into existence'. Guder asserts that we are invited into this formational growth via God's redemptive mission for the purpose of 'walking worthily' (based on key Pauline passages). In essence then, building up the body of Christ *to reach maturity*, should also serve its going out, that is, the church as a trinitarian, sent (apostolic) community for the sake of the world (*missio ecclesiae*; see Goheen 2000:224).

1.See for example the *Edinburgh 2010 Common Call*, which starts with these words: 'Trusting in the Triune God and with a renewed sense of urgency, we are called to incarnate and proclaim the good news of salvation, of forgiveness of sin, of life in abundance, and of liberation for all poor and oppressed ... '.

Grappling with God's power in patriarchal societies scarred by power abuse[2]

The world in which the church exists, is a place where the power of God and the power of people operate simultaneously. Our world is filled with natural and human-induced disasters, ranging from tsunamis and pandemics to domestic violence and collective trauma fuelled by genocides. In these crises, various powers – divine and human – are at work and it needs to be discerned and described theologically as far as possible. The afore-mentioned disasters intensify humanity's existential realities such as despair, loss and suffering. Such experiences challenge us to grow more resilient and to foster more tolerant faith-based care networks.

Missional ministries, including church-based pastoral care practices, have a prophetic responsibility to discern the powers that dominate our societies and should aim to combat inequalities and diminish vulnerabilities, (among others), for example in terms of gender and race (see eds. Johnson & Zurlo 2020:5). By fulfilling this prophetic role, pastoral care practices pursue ways in which evil can be resisted and transformed by Christian faith communities, instead of trying to rationally make sense of it (see e.g. Swinton 2007). This is a mature approach to dealing with the realities of sin and suffering. Caring responds to more than just individuals coming for help. It also aims to re-arrange the power dynamics within social systems and communities through advocacy, resistance, building coalition, et cetera (Graham 2002:275).

Historical realities such as colonial and imperial rule, have been heavily influenced by and simultaneously given shape to inequalities in human relations. These realities also determine – and sometimes are or were determined by – our theological understanding of the power of God. Subsequently, our understanding of God, that is our God-image, is crucial for interpreting how we use or abuse power in our live as Christians today, and for discerning how to combat power abuse through prophetic pastoral care practices (Louw 2007:92–96).

Now the important question surfaces: What kind of theology is appropriate when mission-minded Christian caregivers want to interpret God's power in a fractured world? How can a balanced theological perspective on the power of God enable pastoral care practitioners – who operate from a missional perspective – to mitigate the vulnerabilities caused by injustice and unequal distributions of power? These questions direct the main inquiry of this article. The biblical

witness is clear: God is powerful. But how? What 'kind' of power does God possess? Grappling with understanding the power of God involves (among others) various inter-connected themes such as God's omnipotence and how it relates to the deeply intricate and enmeshed philosophical-theological theme of theodicy, which also disputes the idea of a loving and just God amid the existence of evil and suffering, human agency, et cetera (see Peckham 2018).

The recovery of a missional understanding of God, based on a trinitarian theology, offers fresh resources for reconceptualising spiritual formation today – not as a theology from above that fosters a universal, abstract idea of idealised mission, but instead on mission as authentic discipleship (Kim & Fitchett-Climenhaga 2022:12). Within this process of theological rediscovery, I argue that a balanced view on God's power, as revealed in the suffering and resurrection of Christ and the empowering work of God's Spirit, is crucial. It includes intentionally choosing to view 'power as love' (vulnerability), instead of 'power as force' (control). Such perspectives on power profess the veracity of the unfailing love (*hesed*) of a compassionate God, whose presence gives us eschatological hope and the courage to be (without dominating). God's power fosters maturity, and thereby promotes justice, human dignity, and loving service (*diakonia*)[3] in prophetic ways (see ed. Jukko 2022:304). It follows that God's power should be theologically discerned, not merely as 'power over', but rather as 'power with/in',[4] via the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Zch 4:6; Migliore 2004:56).

Historical perspectives on power within the church and its mission

According to Lesslie Newbigin (1995), mission is proclaiming the kingdom of the Father, sharing the life of the Son and bearing the witness of the Spirit. God's mission emanates from the power of God, the glorious almighty Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection (Eph 1:17–21), executed in the power of the Holy Spirit (Ac 1:8). The gospel is indeed the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes (Rm 1:16). Such is God's positive, life-giving, charismatic power.

However, although power is not always negative in human relations, it is always potentially dangerous in Christian mission, because power structures and networks still create groups that are powerful and powerless, and consequently remain constant issues in mission. Christian mission has always been related to power (Balia & Kim 2010:87). As Longkumer, Sorensen and Biehl (2016) emphasise:

> Being empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses of the transforming gospel, and at the same time becoming vulnerable for the sake of a reconciled humanity, calls for continued

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2. Although it exceeds the scope of this article, I acknowledge that the issue of the power of God overlaps with many related issues in a variety of theological fields of study. For instance, within the field of Systematic Theology, it can be connected to the doctrines of the Trinity, providence as well as the image of God (*Imago Dei*). Different theological traditions, for example liberal process theology (see Case-Winters 1990), evangelical, neo-orthodox, feminist or liberation theologies, approach the issue from different angles. In addition, feminist scholars (cf. Ramshaw 1995; Reuther 1983; Schüssler-Fiorenza 1983) have indicated the links between the domination of women or people from other race groups or cultures, or the subjugation of the earth itself, and patriarchal views of God.

3. For a current and dynamic exposition of ecumenical initiatives and a wide range of theological perspectives concerning global *diakonia*, see the recent World Council of Churches [WCC] (2022) publication, *Called to transformation: Ecumenical diakonia*.

4. The distinction between 'power-over' (domination), 'power-to' (empowerment) and 'power-with' (towards a shared goal) is important here. See Ehrensperger (2007:26, 30).

reflection in understanding the concept and expression of power in relation to Christian mission. (p. 1)

The impact of unequal power relations can be found in all types of relationships and in all areas of life. Whether it is men over women, or in different forms of age, race, tribe, or class supremacy. Hence, within human relationships, feminist approaches have emphasised the intertwined dimensions of 'power-over', 'power-to' and 'power-with' (Ehrensperger 2007:34).

Sin has found expression throughout history, both within and beyond the biblical narrative, in lamentable examples of colonial or patriarchal rule and, among others, in race- and gender-based violence, marginalisation and oppression. Most of us still live in male-dominated, patriarchal societies. Spanish sociologist, Manuel Castells (1997:134), contends that patriarchalism is a 'founding structure of all contemporary societies'. According to Chittister (1998:25), patriarchy is built upon four inter-related fundamental realities: domination, hierarchy, dualism, and essential inequality. These realities make power abuse evident in our broken societies' socio-cultural institutions and in education, economy, politics, family, and religion (Okoli & Okwuosa 2020:1). The important point to remember here is that our misdirected theological views of God's power have the potential to mislead us toward the institutionalisation of absolutistic patriarchal values that can distort power relationships in faith communities. This, subsequently, can lead and has led to the oppression of women or people of other racial groups. An example is the apartheid theology, or the ideology of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa before 1990.

Historically, the Christian establishment in the West was deeply influenced by the purposes of empires. The church was infiltrated by Constantine imperialism since the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. Human notions of power and authority were openly applied to God. As John Hall (1993:108) succinctly argues: 'Powerful people demand powerful deities – and get them!' Imperial rule, in turn, gravitated towards and simultaneously gave shape to inequalities in human relations. For this reason, Godly power was, and still is, often interpreted in terms of governance (strength) rather than in terms of care and compassion (vulnerability) (Fiddes 2000:62–29; Louw 2020).

Because of the Christian hierarchy's complicity in the maintenance of the Roman state, Drake (2000:23) rightly asks the poignant question: 'How did a religion whose central tenet is to suffer, rather than do harm – to "turn the other check" – come to accept the coercive power of the state as its reasonable due?' The church succumbed to sustaining the power of an authoritative regime, namely the Roman Empire. 'Money and political power were now at the disposal of the church and paved the way for its expansion' (Vähäkangas 2022:689). A particular understanding of both the power of the church and the power of God, fed this imperialistic thinking, often leading to power abuse and even violence.

Mennonite Church historian, Alan Kreider (2016:296), in his fascinating book, *The patient ferment of the Early Church*, concludes that contemporary Christians in the West (and possibly further) live with a post-Enlightenment and post-Christendom heritage, wherein the following assumption seems self-evident: 'that in its essence Christianity is violent, and that Christian mission – however loving its professed intentions – is essentially an exercise in imperialism'. No wonder Kreider pleads for a return to the habitus of meek patience, so vivid in the lives and writings of Early Church pioneer Christians like Cyprian, Origen, et cetera who not only spoke great things, but lived them … and who further did not – like others after them in the Constantinian era (including Augustine's so-called missional revolution) – rely on the intolerant power of the empire or state to vindicate their Christian views by coercion or force.

In addition to the above-mentioned, it can be argued that the God-images of many Christian churches in the West were strongly influenced by Greek philosophical thought, and hence portrayed God as distant, wholly impassable, and impassionate.[5] Placher (1994) contends:

> Perhaps the strangest event in the intellectual history of the West was the identification of the biblical God with Aristotle's unmoved mover or some other picture, derived from Greek philosophy, of God as impassable and unchanging … much of the Christian tradition does seem to have portrayed God as unaffected and unaffectable. (pp. 3–26; see also Placher 1999:192)

This portrayal of God eventually also 'prepared the way' to a modernistic anthropology where power, autonomy, and independence, that is, masculine values in patriarchal societies, became the ideological structure of many societies. Therefore, Koopman (2004:190-200) suggests that healthy (gender) relations today should be based on an anthropology of vulnerability, relationality, and dependence. That does not imply that all power and autonomy should be deemed universally dominating. However, the argument here is that a mission-minded pastoral approach intentionally opposes an anthropology of destructive autonomy and self-serving power. The reason being that such views of humans – often originating from unbalanced images of God and God's power – lie at the centre of many of the patriarchal traditions that often leads to the oppression of women, violence, and loss of human dignity.

God's omnipotence revisited from a biblical theological perspective

The Apostles' creed boldly starts with the confession, 'I believe in God, the Father almighty'. Belief in an all-powerful (omnipotent) God is indeed a core part of Christian faith. But the meaning of God's omnipotence is not necessarily evident to all who confess their belief. The almightiness of God does not mean God can do anything at all (Hall 1986:159). Biblical theology teaches us that God's power cannot act contrary to God's goodness, justice, and reason. God cannot lie or pervert

5.This understanding will obviously be viewed very differently in contexts in which the church is socio-politically weak (e.g. in Japan, where Christians are in the minority of about one of the entire population).

justice, because such acts are clearly contradictory with the Christian understanding of God's nature. Thus, the belief in the 'Father almighty' and the notion of God's omnipotence, must be aligned to a proper Christian understanding of God's nature and character (ed. McGrath 2011:209–212). God's almightiness is revealed by God's true character, overflowing with unfailing love and reliability (*hesed*). In this, we vividly see God's majestic sovereignty and glory. The Bible testifies throughout of God's gracious solidarity with our deepest human plight by the unbreakable bond of God's covenantal love. Thus, God's almightiness is also linked to (social) justice and righteousness (cf. Dt 10:17–19; Louw 2020).

In a wounded world, various meaningful perspectives on God's compassion can guide our reinterpretation of God's omnipotence. John Stott (2006:326) rhetorically asks how, in the real world of pain, one could 'worship a God who was immune to it?'. He (Stott 2006:323) contends that the God who is love, subjects himself to suffering, making himself 'vulnerable to pain', but *without* thereby weakening his sovereign omnipotence. Kazoh Kitamori (1965) formulates a *Theology of the pain of God*, in which he claims God contains what cannot be contained (see also Fiddes 2000:161; Wolterstorff 2006). Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1967) argues that:

> … Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering … Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. (p. 188)

Jürgen Moltmann (quoted in ed. McGrath 2018:35) even argues that a God incapable of suffering is a loveless being (like the God of Aristotle), but he qualifies the suffering: 'God does not suffer like his creature, because his being is incomplete. He loves from the fullness of his being and suffers because of his full and free love'.

In the above-mentioned views, a trinitarian understanding of divine providence is defined by the power of love – visible in the ministry, cross, and resurrection of Jesus and not by some profane notion of God as pure almightiness. Daniel Migliore (2004) asserts strikingly, regarding the power of the triune God:

> [I]s not raw omnipotence but the power of suffering, liberating, reconciling love. An emphasis on God as Trinity gives providence a different face. The God who creates and preserves the world is not a despotic ruler but our 'Father in heaven'; not a distant God but a God who becomes one of us and accompanies us as the incarnate, crucified, risen Lord; not an ineffective God but one who rules all things by Word and Spirit rather than by the power of coercion. (p. 133)

Samuel Terrien (2004) echoes these sentiments, when he views God as Father and not as a transcendent deity who exercises his lofty power and remains detached from the weaknesses and the tragedies of the human condition.[6] Instead:

God is the self-offering Spirit, who shares in the suffering and even in the death of humanity. The impending death of Jesus prefigures the true fatherhood of God, a God who immolates himself for the sake of his children. (pp. 141–142)

Terrien (2004) argues further:

> Divine fatherhood has nothing to do with the American idea of manliness or virility. It points to strength in weakness, to the power of love that lives in death and beyond death. (p. 221)

A theology of power in vulnerability

Sound biblical theology resonates the power of vulnerability. In 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, the apostle Paul uses an apparent contradiction to show in what way a suffering and crucified God becomes the power of our salvation through vulnerability. This contradiction coincides with Scott Sunquist's dynamic understanding (2013) of Christian mission as being steeped in, that is, participating in the suffering and glory of Christ. The power of God is displayed in suffering and vulnerability. It is deprived of dominating threat, power, and all forms of social and cultural prejudice. The paradoxical tensions between power and vulnerability, strength, and weakness, and between proximity (immanence) and distance (transcendence), become clear.

The apostle Paul links God to the event of suffering, and introduces the 'weakness of God', the strange logic of the cross. This notion of power is marked as 'foolishness'. The power of human beings is challenged by the weakness of God that is stronger than human strength (1 Cor 1:18–25; 12:8–12). Why? Because it affirms God's actual identification with the vulnerability of suffering human beings. It opposes destructive domination, and it affirms constructive, prophetic opposition. With the act of forgiveness, Jesus – as the perfect image of God (Col 1:15–20), not of Roman power – became an innocent and helpless victim of Roman imperialism (Mt 27:27–31). The significance of Jewish, (imperial) Greek-Roman and broader Hellenistic frameworks, should be kept in mind when reading Paul's remarks on power and vulnerability (Punt 2012).

The life and work of Christ presents his body, the church, with an ongoing challenge of doing missions 'under the cross', as the International Missionary Council recognised anew at its gathering in Willingen in 1952. Kirsteen Kim (2010) refers to this event by stating:

> Repenting of the triumphalist attitudes of the past, it was recognised that, like Christ himself, the church's mission is in weakness not in power (2 Cor 12:9), and that the way of Christ is through suffering before victory (Rm 6:4). So the sacrificial, self-giving nature of the incarnation (Phlp 2:5–11) was recognized again. (pp. 6–7)

Jesus denounces the way of earthly rulers or kingdoms that reign by the sword. Jesus himself is killed by such enemies to whom he has shown nothing but love. All these events appear to indicate weakness. However, Paul claims the cross is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1:24). As

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6. A thorough exploration of this important but controversial issue, goes beyond the scope of this article. For a summary of Terrien's arguments and how he engages with the issues of inclusive God-language, the fatherhood of God, and God-images

in terms of power and gender (in conversation with feminist theologians), see Van der Watt (2007:327–331).

John Frame (2002:527) contends, 'Clearly, God transformed this weakness to accomplish his most amazing – indeed, his most powerful – work. That is, bringing life from death and defeating Satan and all his hosts'. God's sovereign power is clearly visible 'not only in spectacular displays like the miracles of Jesus. It is also made known by events in which people perceive God as weak'.

Scripture reveals a pervasive emphasis on God's mighty power (Ps 24:7–8; Eph 1, etc.); therefore, we cannot merely ignore the notion of a God who has 'power over' others, just because we prefer to view God in an alternative way. In addition, we should not restrict our view of God's power only to what God does, or has done in history, because God does not exhaust his power in his works of creation and providence. Hence, understanding the relation between God's power and God's providence is crucial. God's majestic creation and God's sustaining providence therein (Rm 1:20), may lead many Christians to think of God's power as a type of brute strength that can overpower any obstacle by sheer force.

In this regard, Paul Helm (1993) argues:

> It is tempting to think of God as a Herculean figure, able to out-lift and out-throw and outrun all his opponents. Such a theology would be one of physical or metaphysical power; whatever his enemies can do God can do it better or more efficiently than they … But Scripture does not teach that the doctrine of providence follows from divine power in this fashion … there is also a sense in which the providence reveals the weakness of God, and in which the providential purposes of God are furthered by that weakness. (p. 224)

In this vein, Hendrikus Berkhof's (1985) theological logic when dealing with the issue of God's almightiness, is worth noting. Basically, Berkhof attempts to hold a symmetrical view of God's transcendence and God's immanence, viewing the latter as basis for the former. Hence, God's almighty power should always be interpreted via the lens of God's love, which is vividly displayed on the cross of Christ. The quality of God's power is different from human categories of power. Berkhof (1985:124–140) therefore uses the phrase '*weerlose overmacht*', that is, vulnerable almightiness, which signifies a combination of God's almightiness and his identification with us (see also Placher 1999:204–205).

In short, God identifies with our suffering in the world. Such an identification makes evident the power of God, which includes God's vulnerable solidarity and compassion. God's power cannot be divorced from compassion and responsibility (Migliore 2004:83). It is the power of resurrection and transformation which brings new life out of the suffering and evil of the world (Inbody 1997:140). Through the Holy Spirit, God's power is the power to create new life (Ezk 31:10), to cure, and to rebuild rather than the power to impose, that is, to control. All in all, God's power is indeed defined by his overflowing love – defined by the Spirit of love (Rm 5:5) – to bring about justice, freedom, and well-being (Kim 2012:134–135). Now the important question needs to be answered:

How do these insights into God's power relate to the issue of maturity in spiritual formation as part of mission-minded pastoral care?

Cultivating faith maturity through vulnerability as core aim of mission-minded spiritual formation

Maturity defined

Conradie (2016:5) defines *maturation* as 'the process of becoming mature, the emergence of individual and behavioural characteristics through growth processes over time'. The goal of reaching maturity is widely accepted across cultural disparities. Such a maturation process can be actualised in various spheres of life, for instance as an individual, or as an institution. The process is also multi-dimensional and can, for example, be hindered by injustices. Regarding individual maturation, bodily or emotional dimensions can (among others) be distinguished. Conradie (2016:6) emphasises that emotional maturity is more complex to analyse, 'because it is never complete'.

As was stated in the introduction, maturity in this article is specifically focused on growing, or maturing in Christian faith. Therefore, it is linked to the practices of spiritual formation. From a biblical perspective, isolated 'maturity', bent in on the self, is undesirable (1 Cor 10:24). Growing toward maturity, from a Christian perspective, implies growing toward the awareness that human existence is inherently relational. Mature Christians therefore realise that they do not belong only to themselves, but also to others, be they immediate (human) others or the ultimate Other (God).

The apostle Paul says in Philippians 3:12:

> 'I do not claim that I have already succeeded or have already become perfect. I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to himself'

Indeed, Christian believers are all still pilgrims on this journey of spiritual formation, which Christ himself has initiated. An important observation to note at this point is that spiritual or faith maturity does not grow in isolation. Conradie (2016:6) aptly highlights the important fact, that an 'individual cannot reach maturity without being part of a network of relationships that becomes mature in love'. Conradie's remark rings true in the individual vs. communal sense of, for instance Christian spiritual formation. But that is not all. In addition, it is essential to realise we cannot and should not isolate our spiritual growth from our emotional growth. The premise is that faith maturity implies that we should also become more emotionally mature people.

However, we know that emotional maturity does not always come to fruition as we grow in our faith. For instance, in the North American context, spiritual maturity has become an acute issue. In his book titled, *From here to maturity*, Thomas Bergler (2014) argues for surmounting what he defines as 'the juvenilization of American Christianity'. Bergler focuses on

churches' youth ministries, but asserts that the dilemma of immaturity is not merely a problem to be solved by adolescents, parents, or youth ministers. The real problem is the glorification of this immature state that is pervasive not only in culture at large, but also in (American) churches. Even adult believers adapted the Christian faith to adolescent preferences, morphing it into a Christianised version of adolescent narcissism. Bergler's antidote (2014) is found in the spiritual nurturing of young people by creating an intergenerational culture of growth for them – mutually, vis-à-vis adults – towards spiritual maturity. This mutual, dynamic process includes observation, learning, teaching, and sharing. It takes place in a broader context of human relationality, because one cannot mature spiritually without both being nurtured by and contributing to the growth of others (Bergler 2014:111-112).

Bergler (2014) further emphasises that reaching spiritual maturity is not an unattainable magical process equal to distant perfection. Lastly, he (Bergler 2014:38) laments the fact that 'juvenile spirituality' fails to prepare people for suffering as it is depicted in the Bible: '[M]ature Christians persevere in love, even through hard times'. We know that suffering can generate patience and endurance (Rm 5:3–5). It can release one from being overly self-focused and make one aware of the needs of others. It can also develop maturity and a sense of meaning that enables you to transcend the boundaries set by your present circumstances.

Maturity actualised in the daily lives of Christian disciples living in a wounded world

The goal of Christian maturity is the fruit of a life lived by the Spirit of God, who empowers Christian believers with a living hope (1 Pt 1). Pastoral caregivers keep this goal in mind when they aim to facilitate spiritual health and, in the process, help fostering a mature faith. They are called to equip the faith community to this end. This process is called spiritual formation, and it forms part of mission as authentic discipleship, which involves a (life-long) process of transformation in individual and collective attitudes, behaviours, and values. Church-based pastoral caregivers' core structure for support and counsel in this process – as part of the *missio Dei* – is the liberating truth of the cross and resurrection of Christ.

But what might 'maturity' mean for Christians today? God promises that he will accomplish his good purpose of maturing us and making us more like his Son (Rm 8:29). Basically, growing up and going on in the Christian life, is about deepening our understanding of who God is and maturing in Christ through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit (Ferguson 2019; Wilson 2019:121). Several New Testament passages talk about the need for Christian maturity.

For example, the apostle Paul writes about maturity as a central goal in his ministry. In Colossae, he worked hard to 'present everyone mature in Christ' (Col 1:28; 4:12). Paul uses similar language in Ephesians 4:13, 15 when he speaks about the goal of the body of Christ – 'we shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature … we must

grow up in every way to Christ, who is the head'. The maturity goal in Ephesians 4 is both aimed at individual and corporate level. This wonderful dynamic, 'when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love' (Eph 4:16). Love, then, is Christian maturity in action (1 Cor 13:4–5). Basically, Christian maturity equals fulfilling the double law of biblical love towards God and our neighbour.

Further, the unnamed author of the letter to the Hebrews, addresses Christians' struggling with pressures to compromise their faith. Therefore, he exhorts and encourages them instead to 'go on to maturity' (Heb 6:1). The word 'mature' (*teleios*) belongs to a family of words in the New Testament which convey the notion of wholeness. It can also mean 'perfect' or 'complete', without lacking anything, for example a *full* life. It becomes clear that the road to maturity is not one of upward mobility, but of sacrificing the self and of servanthood (Phlp 2). Followers of Christ are called to a 'foolish' way of denying one's own desires for self-fulfilment. The way of self-denial is different from 'worldly' wisdom. This kenotic way does not cling to its power, but instead shares it to establish the reign of God (*shalom*; Mt 5).

A Christological view on maturity, highlights the fact that Jesus is both the author of our faith and the one who matures and perfects it (Heb 12:2). Indeed, our Lord is the One who became mature through his sufferings (Heb 2:10; 5:8–9). In Jesus' sermon on the mount (Mt 5:48), he says: 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (i.e. mature). In the previous verses (5:17–47) Jesus describes the qualities of spiritual maturity. A pneumatological perspective on maturity reveals the reality that mature Christians are shaped by the power of the Holy Spirit to produce a character which displays the fruit of the Spirit (Gl 5:22–25) – both as individual Christians and as part of the body of Christ. The Spirit of Christ gives us spiritual gifts to equip us for God's work (Rm 12:6–8; 1 Cor 12:1–11), and to make us more like Christ himself (2 Cor 3:18). Mature Christian women and men are committed to serve one another with the fruit that comes from the Spirit, because – as *The Cape Town Commitment* (II-F-3) advocates – 'we should not quench the Spirit by despising the ministry of any'.

How then, does spiritual maturity relate to the issue of power? Significantly, keeping in mind previous discussions on power, the characteristics of Christian maturity (discussed here above) represent the opposite of unilateral power and its abuse. Christian maturity, based on a healthy spirituality, implies a constant awareness of the presence of power and its mechanisms in our lives. Consequently, mature Christians seek forms of shared power – 'power with' – without veiling or amplifying existing differences in power. They recognise their own desire for power as a 'daily vice' (Pollefeyt, quoted in ed. Dillen 2014:xix).

Mission-minded pastoral caregivers embody and witness to the truth that our worth, power and dignity as equal image bearers, reside in receiving and sharing God's unfailing love. The more we practice the sharing of God's love on our

journey as disciples, the more we grow mature in Christ. Ultimately, our human identity is not equivalent to our achievements, success, or power. Instead, our Christian identity flows from the capacity and choice for hospitable and loving relationships.

Conclusion

From all the arguments presented in this article thus far, and in line with the article's main research question and theme, it follows that mature Christians' faith content should reflect a meaningful understanding of God, specifically God's power, which enables a fullness of life for all. Pastoral caregivers are called to lead believers to a mature faith that embodies a congruency between their beliefs about God, and their words and deeds, *coram Deo*. Essentially, such an integrated, mature faith's basic characteristics are service, compassion and empathy that is sharing God's power through love (*diakonia*). Hence, I contend that Christian caregivers should discern God's power theologically – not merely as 'power over', but rather as 'power with or within'. Such discernment will help them to foster mature disciples of Christ – through the life-long process of spiritual formation – who can in turn lead apostolic communities toward justice and dignity for the sake of God's kingdom in the world.

Pastoral caregivers (lay and also ordained) guide Christian believers on their journey of spiritual formation to grow into a loving, mature body focused on Christ, its head (Eph 4:14–16). In this vein, pastoral theology and pastoral care – as part of the long history of the care of souls (*cura animarum*) in Catholic and Protestant church settings – plays a formative role in the lives of Christian believers.

During the process of faith formation and growth to maturity in Christ, mission-minded pastoral caregivers need to heed to the reality that power is everywhere. It is a complex phenomenon. Everyone has the opportunity for power, and the possibility of exercising power. No one is completely powerless. However, although everyone has the access to power, not everyone possesses the same (amount of) power (Reynaert, in ed. Dillen 2014:3–16). Mature Christians takes power into account by constantly recognising and staying aware of it, and by seeking for forms of shared power – power with – without blurring or amplifying power differences in human relations.

Pastoral caregivers are called to intentionally strive to use power in a kenotic way by radically following Jesus' example in Philippians 2:5–11 responsibly. The actual transforming power flows from Christ through the work of his Holy Spirit and not via our human-made patriarchal power. God has all the power necessary to be God, and graciously makes this unique divine power – in love – available in all necessities and circumstances (Graham 2002:276).

Our power relationships and how we deal with it as Christians, are regulated by our views of who God is and what God's power entails.

It was indicated throughout how a balanced theological view of God's power can benefit pastoral care practitioners – who operate from a missional perspective – to mitigate the vulnerabilities caused by injustice and unequal distributions of power. I conclude with the assertion that the veracity of the unfailing love (*hesed*) of a compassionate God has been made manifest in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ who's presence, through his Spirit, gives us ultimate (eschatological) hope. Christ's cross (representing God's vulnerable identification) and resurrection (representing God's powerful transformation; Rv 11:15–19), even now anticipates a new quality of being human. This new quality – given by the empowering Spirit of God – is orientated toward discipleship and maturity in Christ, which should intentionally promote human dignity, justice and vulnerable courage in our wounded world.

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